



Office of the President

“World as Dreamt, World as Is,” Bread Loaf School of English Commencement, August 2016

August 1, 2016

As I have been thinking about you, and the shape of your next work in the world, I have been thinking about Melinda Talkington. She taught English in my high school, all levels. I forgot about her as soon as I graduated, in that selfish, nonchalant kind of forgetting that 18-year-olds are particularly capable of.

Melinda was the roundest person I had ever met—face and body almost perfectly spherical, interrupted only by the cat’s-eye glasses she wore—and in the late ’70s, those glasses were neither hip nor retro. A group of us intense literary aspirants, fiercely competitive but pretending not to be, visited her regularly at her home.

She would greet us barefoot with a glass of wine in her hand. Her apartment was forested with unruly ficus plants, and she would ask for an apology if you brushed by one too roughly. Their potting soil was ground into the formerly white carpet in an unapologetic mosaic. Her rooms always smelled—unmistakably of tea grounds, and then something else mysterious—a sweet rotting smell that emanated from under the newspapers in the corner that she never threw away.

She would have been, and perhaps was, in a way, a great homeless person—like Aunt Sylvie in Marilynne Robinson’s gorgeous first novel, *Housekeeping*. Sylvie came home to care for her nieces, but her love of the train and the bench and the itinerant life could not manifest itself at home, except in her love of piles of newspapers that harbored secrets of the road. In 1978 and

'79, we happily ground more dirt into Melinda Talkington's carpet mosaic with our Joni Mitchell boots. We demanded she tell us everything she knew about poetic form. She required us to write sestinas and read H. D. and become insanely competitive with each other about villanelles.

Melinda had many secrets that I never knew: she left only the faintest trace on the Internet—a poem in the *Southern Review*, an essay on Italian Renaissance in the *Columbia* literary journal electronically archived now from 1972. And here's something more I forgot: She was always talking about the unseen effects of writing. I remember a particularly long argument with her about D. H. Lawrence, whom I hated with an inarticulate intensity the minute I read *Sons and Lovers*. "Why is it up to you to decide what happens to someone's work, and where it goes in the world?" she asked me. "D. H. Lawrence might wake someone else up, and in exactly the way you want them to be woken up."

And here's the final thing I forgot until I remembered: she was always talking about balance. I found a note from her the other day in my yearbook, which was otherwise strewn with confidence-building felicitations such as, "Hey LP, keep the faith. You turned out to be better than I thought." Melinda wrote: "Don't forget to balance. Remember the balance between dreaming and the world." I think then she was mostly telling me to chill, although I doubt I heeded that advice, which has been given rather frequently. But now I ask: why would our teacher spent countless hours with young women writing sestinas? What unspeakable privilege did I have, that I could afford to be in the company of someone who wanted us to be competitive about villanelles? Her students' voices were voices that she believed might create, if only for a minute, a better equilibrium between the world as dreamt and the world as is.

That is the shape of your work now: the delicate balancing of the world as dreamt and the world as is. For your students, and for yourselves. If there is in your classrooms a surfeit of the world as it is, you can require your students to dream. Required reverie should never be underestimated. It's called reading. And if there is a surfeit of dreaming in your classroom, you can ask your students to remember the world as it is—by showing them again the disciplined love of objects—things in themselves—which are the ground of our realities and the first commitment of literature. You can weave for them the ethical tapestry of the particular.

Melinda Talkington: now, the faintest of traces in the world. And yet still a towering force for young women now grown older who otherwise would not have dared to write. You now have become

those towering voices that will be remembered. By returning to us, again and again over many summers, you have become Bread Loaf voices. Bread Loaf people. You have become the creators of that transformational space where students live, breathe and make quiet and loud revolutions because you teach them they can. You will be the ones who have the wisdom to help them balance their dreaming and their waking. As the psalmist says, you will bless their setting forth and their returning. And you may not feel it, and they may not always remember, but you will do so all the days of their lives.

We are so very proud. Congratulations.

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Office Hours - Spring 2023
Friday, March 31 from 1:00-2:30 p.m.
Wednesday, April 26 from 2:00-3:30 p.m.
Monday, May 15 from 4:00-5:30 p.m.